

# REJOICING IN SUFFERING

by Ray C. Stedman

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When I was in Virginia this past week I met a number of wonderful Christians -- some of whom I had met before, others who were new to me. But one thing that impressed me was the number of people who were going through very severe trials and suffering.

I met a man who was in bed with his wife one morning a year or so ago, when their teenage son suddenly appeared in the doorway with a gun in his hand. Without a word, he suddenly shot them both. When the mother tried to crawl away, the boy shot her a second time. They both managed to escape and called the police, who came and took their son to a mental hospital. This man and his wife managed to survive that terrible time, but I heard him speak to a group of men about it, and he said that God had gotten his attention through that ordeal. He began to learn things that he had never learned before.

I met another man whose son is so mentally disturbed that he has to be kept in a very expensive hospital for treatment which costs \$50,000 a year. I met others who were battling with cancer. I was simply amazed at the number of people struggling with severe problems.

I share this with you to let you know that our brothers on the East coast have as much trouble as we do. So if some of you are going through difficulty or danger, you are not alone. Suffering is something that all Christians are called to experience in one way or another. And yet I suppose there is no question that is more difficult for us to handle than this one. "Why do Christians suffer?"

The theme for this study from the fifth chapter of Romans is how to handle Christian suffering. Chapter 5, as you remember, deals with the results that come in a Christian's life when he truly and genuinely believes that God has given him the gift of righteousness in Jesus Christ our Lord. If you have been justified by faith, then certain results will be obtained. As we have already seen, these results come in various stages, or levels of maturity.

The first one is found in Verses 1-2:

**Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. {Rom 5:1-2 NIV}**

The rejoicing comes immediately. We rejoice because we are going to be with the Lord. We have a hope for the future, a hope beyond death. That is the initial and introductory phase of Christian growth. But Paul goes on. Not only is this so, but there is something more, and this is the topic we take up now in Verses 3-5:

**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. {Rom 5:3-5 NIV}**

It is clear from this that Christians are expected to experience suffering. We don't like that fact, but, nevertheless, it is a fact. In his letter to the Philippians, Chapter 1, Verse 29, the Apostle Paul puts it very plainly, "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake," {Phil 1:29 RSV}. So those who think that becoming a Christian will remove them from suffering have been seriously misled and self-deceived, for the Scriptures themselves teach that we are to expect suffering.

The Greek word for *suffering*, basically, is translated as "tribulation, something that causes distress." It can

range from minor annoyances that we go through every day, to major disasters that come sweeping down out of the blue and leave us stricken and smitten. These are the sufferings that we might go through, the tribulations.

According to Romans 5, the Christian response to suffering is to rejoice: "Not only so, but we rejoice in our sufferings." Here is where many people balk. They say, "I can't buy that! Do you mean to say that God is telling me that when I am hurting and in pain, going through mental and physical torment, I am expected to be glad and happy and rejoice in that? What kind of a nut is this Paul, anyway? It's not human, not natural!"

There are many who feel this way. I think we all easily reflect the attitude of the lady whose pastor went to see her when she was going through trouble. She kept complaining and grouching and griping about it. He stopped her and said, "I don't think you should talk that way. Christians are not to do that." She was very upset. "Why, I don't understand, pastor. I think that when God sends us tribulation, he expects us to tribulate a little bit!"

Most of us would feel the same way. We feel like tribulating, and we do. But it is instructive to note that not only does Paul tell us to rejoice, but this is the unanimous testimony of every writer of the New Testament. We are told by all to rejoice in our suffering. First Peter 4:12 says, "Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is coming upon you to test you, as though some strange thing happened to you." It is not strange, it is normal. James 1:2 says, "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you fall into various tribulation." There is that word again: joy, rejoicing. Even the Lord Jesus told us, in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are you when men persecute you for righteousness' sake, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. [What does he say?] Rejoice, and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven. For so persecuted they the prophets before you," {cf, Matt 5:11-12 KJV}. Paul's call to rejoice in suffering is found everywhere in Scripture.

Let us take a closer look at what this really means. There are certain things it does not mean, though many people think it does:

First, it is clear from Scripture that rejoicing in suffering is not simply stoicism. It is not simply a 'grin and bear it' attitude, or 'tough it out' and see how much you can take, or 'just hang in there until it's over' and 'don't let anything get you down,' or 'keep a stiff upper lip.' Many people feel that if they do that, they are fulfilling the Word and "rejoicing in suffering." But that is not it. There are non-Christians who can do that. Many people pride themselves on how much they can take. Sometimes people who are not Christians will put us to shame by the things that they can take without complaining. Rejoicing in suffering is not merely being stoical.

What else is it not? We are not merely expected to enjoy the pain. There are some people who think "rejoicing in suffering" means that you are to enjoy your pain and hurt, that somehow Christians ought to be glad when terrible tragedy occurs and their hearts are hurting. That is not what Paul is saying. But there are people who feel that way -- they are called masochists -- they like to torture themselves. You have met people like that, who aren't happy unless they're miserable. If you take their misery away from them, they are really wretched, because it is their misery that gives them a sense of contentment. That is a twisted, distorted view of life. That is not what Paul is saying.

Nor is he saying that we merely are to pretend that we are happy. Some think this passage is saying that when you are out in public, you should put on an artificial smile and act happy, when inside your heart is hurting like crazy. Now that is not it. Christianity is never phony. Phonyness of any kind is a false Christianity. Neither the apostles nor the Scriptures ever ask us to be unreal and phony. This Scripture clearly tells us to have a genuine sense of rejoicing.

You may not be able to rejoice right at the moment of trial. Hebrews 12 helps us there. It says plainly, "No discipline for the present is pleasant. But afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it," {cf, Heb 12:11}. Right at the moment of hurt, you are not going to feel like rejoicing, but it should soon follow that you rejoice in your suffering. And that is what Paul plainly says: "We also rejoice in suffering."

I heard a man some years ago put this very clearly. Some of you may remember this man. He was going through great physical trouble, and one of his legs was amputated. That did not arrest the course of his disease, and he ultimately died because of it. Just a few days before his death I visited him in the hospital and he said something to me that I never forgot because it so perfectly expresses what Christian rejoicing in suffering means. He said, "I never would have chosen one of the trials that I've gone through, but I wouldn't have missed any of them for the world!" Now that is saying it. There is an awareness that this suffering has done something of supreme value; therefore, you wouldn't have missed it. But you wouldn't have chosen it, either! That is rejoicing in suffering.

How do you get to the place where you can rejoice in suffering? That is what this passage brings before us, and that is what we need to know. The apostle's answer is, "We rejoice in suffering because we know..." We rejoice because we know something. It isn't just because it's such a great feeling to be hurt, it is because we know something about it. It is something our faith enables us to know, a kind of inside information that others do not share. Worldlings lack it totally. Something that we know will cause us to rejoice in our suffering.

What do we know? Paul says, "Knowing that suffering produces..." Suffering does something, accomplishes something. It is productive. It is of value. We know it works, and that is what makes us rejoice.

Watch a woman in labor; watch the expression on her face. If you have any empathy in you, you can't help but feel deeply hurt with her because she is going through such pain. And yet, there usually is joy in the midst of it because she knows that childbirth produces children. It is the child that makes it all worthwhile. There are probably women here this morning who will gladly go through childbirth again because they want a child. Suffering produces something worthwhile.

Then what does suffering produce? The apostle says there are four things that suffering produces:

First, suffering produces perseverance. In some versions the word may be *patience*. The Greek word literally means "to abide under, to stay under the pressure." Pressure is something we want to get out from under, but suffering teaches us to stay under, to stick in there and hang with it. These are some of the expressions that we use today, and I think they are very valuable. Perseverance is the opposite of panic, of bailing out. The best translation I can think of is the English word "steadiness." Suffering produces steadiness.

When I was a boy in Montana, I used to help a man break horses, working in a corral with 3-year-old horses that had never had saddles on their backs. I was always interested in watching the horses when they first felt a saddle thrown on their back. That must be a frightening experience to an animal. They don't know what in the world is happening to them. Some horses will react with anger, rearing back and trying to get away -- even striking out with their forefeet at their trainer. Their nostrils flare, their eyeballs roll, and they panic! Others will just stand there trembling, shaking like a leaf. They won't move, they're so afraid. They don't know what's happening to them.

I think Christians respond that way, too. Do you remember when you first became a Christian and went through a trial? How easily you panicked and cried out to the Lord, "What's gone wrong?" You were in a panic over what was happening, fearful that it would wreck everything and destroy your hopes and dreams. You were just like the disciples in the boat on the Sea of Galilee when the storm was raging. They panicked. They came to the Lord and shook him and said, "Wake up! Don't you know we're about to perish?" {cf, Matt 8:25, Mark 4:30, Luke 8:24}. And the Lord did as he does with some of us. He stood up and said, "Don't panic." Then he said to the storm, "Peace, be still," {Mark 4:39}. And quiet came.

That is what suffering does. It steadies you. You go through a time like that and you're all panicky; then the Lord stills the storm and you think, "Thank God that's all over. I'll never have to go through that again! I've learned my lesson!" And two weeks later, there is another storm. But this time you've been through it once, so you steady up a bit. You don't get quite so panicky.

You learn something -- you learn about yourself, first. You learn that you're not as strong as you thought you were. You learn that you don't have the 'stick with it' that you thought you had. You wanted to bail out much

sooner than you thought you would.

Then you learn something about the Lord -- you learn how gracious he is. You learn that he can handle events in ways that you couldn't dream of or anticipate. You see him work things out in ways that you could never have guessed. So the third and fourth times a trial comes up, you are steadier. You don't panic, you don't bail out. You stay under and let it work itself out. That is what Paul is saying here. Suffering produces steadiness. If you didn't suffer you would never have that quality.

Second, not only does suffering produce steadiness, but steadiness, Paul says, produces character. The Greek word for *character* carries with it the idea of being put to the test and approved. It is the idea of being shown to be reliable. Steadiness produces reliability. You finally learn that you are not going to be destroyed, that things will work out. Steady up, and people start counting on you. They see strength in you, and you become a more reliable person.

We have all seen the tire advertisements on television. A car is equipped with four tires and is put through horrendous tests -- driven through desert sands, bogs, swamps, and marshes, driven over rough, hard, cobblestone roads, over roads with holes and chuck-holes, over boards studded with nails. The tire is twisted and pulled and stretched in every direction, and you are amazed at what that tire can take! After the test is over, they hold the tire up and it looks like it's never been out of its wrapping! Then the ad comes: "Buy Sock'em Tires! They're tested, proven!" Now that is what this word *character* means. God is building you up so he can hold you up and say, "He's approved, he's tested." God is in the process of making veterans. I have always like that word. A veteran has been through something and has been tested and proven. Let me read to you from the Living Bible a passage I have always loved, Second Corinthians 1:8-10:

**I think you ought to know, dear brothers, about the hard time that we went through in Asia. We were really crushed and overwhelmed, and feared we would never live through it. We felt we were doomed to die and saw how powerless we were to help ourselves; but that was good, for then we put everything into the hands of God, who alone could save us, for he can even raise the dead. And he did help us, and he saved us from a terrible death; yes, and we expect him to do it again and again. {2 Cor 1:8-10 Living Bible}**

Now, that's a veteran speaking. He's been through some tough things, but he knows that God can take him through them, and he will. He isn't saying, "It's all over." No, he is saying, "There's more coming, but God will take us through." That's a veteran.

Years ago I stayed in a home and asked a 9-year-old boy there, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Usually you get the standard answers, but I was amazed at his. I'll never forget it. He said, "I want to be a returned missionary." He didn't want to be just a missionary, but a returned one -- one that's been through it and it's all behind him. Here Paul tells us that God is in the process of building returned missionaries.

Third, we find that reliability produces something. Suffering produces steadiness, steadiness produces reliability, and reliability produces hope. So now we are back to hope again. In Verse 2, Paul spoke of "rejoicing in hope," the hope of sharing the glory of God, a hope for the future beyond death. But here is hope that we will share the glory of God, which is God's character, right now. We have the hope that God is producing the image of Christ in us right now. That's a great thing! And this hope is a certainty, not just a possibility.

We are being changed. We see ourselves changing. We are becoming more like Jesus. We can see that we are more thoughtful, more compassionate, more loving. We are being mellowed. We are becoming like Christ -- stronger, wiser, purer, more patient. To our amazement, a certainty grows in our hearts that God is doing his work just as he promised. He is transforming us into the image of his Son.

That brings us to the fourth step that Paul mentions here, and that is that hope does not disappoint us. (Although I am disappointed in that translation.) I like the King James translation better. It says, "hope does not make us ashamed." That is a figure of speech called *litotes*, which is the use of a negative to express a positive idea. Paul does this in Romans 1:16 when he says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ

because it is the power of God..." What does he mean? He means he is proud; he is confident and bold. I think that is the term that we ought to use here. Hope makes us confident. Hope, or certainty, produces confidence and boldness.

The man I mentioned earlier, who had gone through the terrible trauma of having been shot by his son, stood up last week before a group of men and told them how God used that situation to get his attention. He began to study and to grow. As he spoke, it was evident that a man who previously had been ashamed to speak of Christ was now confident and bold. What the Lord had shown him, and how the Lord supported and sustained him through this terrible tragic time means so much to this man that he didn't care what anybody thought about it. He shared openly what God had brought him through. We lose our fear of ridicule and shame and we speak up and share out of the reality of our experience of what God has brought us through.

Paul goes on to explain why our hope does not disappoint us. He says it is "because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." Now, to my mind, this is one of the most important verses in the book of Romans. It is a very significant verse because it is adding a thought that we have not had in this book up to now. It is the explanation, above all else, of how to rejoice in suffering. You can see how important this is, because it is the first mention in the book of Romans of the Holy Spirit. This is also the very first time in this book that the love of God is brought in. Up to now, Paul has not said anything about the love of God, but now it is "the love of God that is shed abroad in our hearts, by the Holy Spirit, who is given to us."

We need to be very careful to see how Paul presents this concept here because the love of God is the subject he develops in Verses 6-10. That connection is important because these verses have been extracted from their context and used for evangelistic preaching so many times that we have forgotten what they originally meant.

**... God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given to us.**

**You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**

**Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! {Rom 5:5b-11 NIV}**

The argument here is extremely important. It will explain to us how to rejoice in suffering. I know some Christians who are suffering, but are not being made steady and reliable and confident. Instead, they are being made bitter and resentful and angry, even to the point of denying their faith. Suffering, you see, does not produce these qualities automatically. You can go through suffering as a Christian and be filled with anger and rage and resentment against God. What makes the difference?

As Paul explains here, the difference is in seeing your suffering as evidence of God's love, and not his wrath. Then you will experience that love in the midst of the suffering. The Holy Spirit will shed abroad in your heart an experience of the love of God so rich and radiant and glorious that you will not be able to help but rejoice in your suffering. But, if you see your suffering as evidence of God's wrath, you will be rendered frustrated and angry and resentful and miserable. That is why Paul brings in this description of God's love for us.

I am sure that anyone who has gone through any degree of suffering knows that in the moment of pain and hurt it is easy to feel that God does not love you. It is easy to feel rejected, unloved. We are so used to thinking that love is something that blesses us and warms us and takes care of us that it is almost impossible for us to think we are being loved when we are hurting. It is hard for us to believe that the one who is doing the hurting is doing it out of genuine love for us. We feel broken, we feel worthless, we feel forgotten. That is why we need to understand the argument in Verses 6 through 10.

Paul says there is a place where every Christian knows that God loves him, even though he himself is worthless and useless and forgotten. What is that place? It is the cross. In the cross of Jesus Christ you always see two things: First, you see yourself. You see, as Paul puts it here, that you are helpless. If there were any other way to get to God, then there never would have been a cross. But the cross is God's testimony that there is no other way. That is why it says, "At the right time, in due time, Christ died." At that time in history God amply demonstrated to all the world that man could not save himself.

The great Hebrew prophets had spoken, and that didn't help. Greek philosophers had taught, and that didn't help. The Romans had come in with their military might, and law and order was imposed over the course of the whole world of that day, and that didn't help. At the right time, Christ died on the cross so that men could see how helpless and powerless they were to save themselves.

As we look at the cross we see how ungodly we are. We are not like God, we don't act like God. We have the capacity to do so, but we don't. We even want to at times, but we don't. Therefore, we see in the cross how unlike God we are. We see that we are sinners. We are involved in things that are hurtful. We are destroying ourselves and others. We find ourselves lawless and selfish at times, and we know it was man's sin -- our sin, yours and mine -- that nailed Jesus to that cross. It was not his own sin, but yours and mine. There we learn that we are enemies of God, enemies sabotaging God's plan to help us, wrecking everything he tries to do to reach us. For years we fight back and resist God's efforts to love us and to draw us to himself.

We are the enemies of God. And yet we know, if we are Christians at all, that in that place where man's inadequacy is so fully demonstrated, we also have the clearest testimony that God loves us. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son," {John 3:16 KJV}. Jesus came to break through all our despair and weakness and shame and sorrow and sin, all man's ruin and disaster. He came to demonstrate a God who loved mankind and would not let it perish.

Now we come to the force of Paul's argument. If you clearly knew God's love when you became a Christian -- when you were enemies and helpless and powerless -- how much more can you count on the fact that God loves you now that you are his child? Even though you are suffering, even though you don't feel loved right now, even though it seems as though God is against you, how much more you can count on the fact that God loves you.

Paul is arguing from the greater to the lesser. If God could love you when it was so evident to you that you didn't deserve it, how much more must you reckon upon his love now that you know that you are dear to him and loved by him. Therefore, this suffering is not coming into your life because God is angry with you; it is coming because God loves you. It comes from the heart of a Father who is putting you through some development that you desperately need to grow into the kind of a person you desperately want to be. And he loves you enough that he will not let you off, but will take you through it. Therefore it is not his anger you are experiencing, but his love.

That is what Hebrews 12 argues, isn't it? If we have been disciplined by the fathers of our flesh, and we know they love us, why can't we believe that God loves us when he puts us through times of testing and pressure and suffering. When you see that truth, then you can rejoice, because you know that suffering will produce the things that make you what you want to be. There is a hymn that I think expresses this idea beautifully. It goes like this:

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,  
When our strength has failed, 'ere the day is half done,  
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,  
Our Father's full giving is only begun.  
His love has no limit, His grace has no measure;  
His power no boundary known unto men.  
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,  
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.

## Prayer

Our Father, it is encouraging to us to realize that you are a God of utter realism, that you know thoroughly and completely the raw hurt, the agony, the pain, the bleeding that we can go through. You don't try to dress it up and make it look any different. But nevertheless, Father, we thank you that you assure us and reassure us that we are being loved all through this time, that we are being tested and developed and made into something we need and want very badly, and that you know what you are doing. You are faithful and do not allow us to be tempted above that which we are able to bear. You are even showing us how much we are able to bear, when we think we can't bear very much. Thank you, Lord, for that. Thank you that through the pressure and testing you give a deep sense of joy. And as we understand that this is coming from your loving hand, you, by the Holy Spirit, will release in our hearts your love to us, to steady us and enfold us and keep us strong and rejoicing. We thank you for this in Jesus' name, Amen.

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