

The Triumphant Christian Spirit

Romans 5:1-5

This has been a difficult year. Maybe you've had a hard time maintaining a spirit of Thanksgiving with everything going on. It is truly hard to be thankful when you feel that you've lost so much. C. S. Lewis once said, "Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pain. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."¹ Maybe you've lost your sense of normal—your stability and peace of mind. Maybe you've lost your job, your business, even some friends. Maybe you feel as though you've lost your rights, freedoms, and independence. Maybe you feel like you've lost all hope and joy and certainty. A friend recently shared he has not felt like himself since March. Last month the engine to our van seized up. It cost us \$5,000 to replace. We never found out what happened. No explanation. No reason why. **Not having a rational explanation or logical reason for our suffering only multiplies our agony.** Well, after 8 months, we know this is not a blizzard. It's definitely been a long winter, and now it's beginning to look more and more like an ice age and there is still no end in sight. And the more inconsistent and irrational it seems, the more difficult it grows. This year has been the great revealer. As things are stripped away, God is revealing our hearts to us. What we love and value. What we place our hope and trust in. What is reliable and what is not.

The Christian life on earth is a paradox. We are absolutely certain of our eternal future, but when it comes to our immediate future, we remain in the dark. This is perfectly summed up in the life of **Admiral Jim Stockdale**.² He was the highest ranking U.S. military officer in the "Hanoi Hilton" prison camp during the height of the Vietnam War. He was imprisoned for 8 years and tortured over twenty times. With no prisoner rights, no release date, and no certainty that he would see his family again, he survived. He explained his secret to survival this way: "You must maintain unwavering faith that you can and will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties, **AND at the same time** have the discipline to confront the most *brutal* facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."³ What we learn from Stockdale is that what separates people, is not the presence or absence of difficulty, but *how* they deal with the inevitable difficulties of life. Why did he make it and not others? He explained that the men who didn't make it out were the *optimists*. They thought they'd get out by Christmas. But Christmas would come and go. They thought they'd get out by Easter, but Easter would come and go. And then Thanksgiving, but then it would be Christmas again. They died of a broken heart—a broken spirit.

Right in the center of our passage, we see the word "rejoice" twice (vv. 2, 3). This has the idea of boasting, exulting, triumphing. We have the best news ever! And listen, we don't just *have* the best news, we are *recipients* of the best news! We are a triumphant people. Ultimately, we are optimists, but we are not naïve about the world. We have **a triumphant optimism** that confronts the brutal realities of this world. We expect difficulty. We embrace suffering. We

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (Macmillan, 1959), 81.

² He and His wife wrote a book called *In Love and War* (1990).

³ Jim Collins, *From Good to Great* (HarperCollins, 2001), 13.

exult in tribulation. We rejoice in hardship. **With stubborn, undaunted gratitude and fortitude, we press on and we never give up.** We bend, but we don't break. "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor 4:8-9). As believers Paul says we can be sure of two things: *salvation* and *suffering* are certain; and the former provides hope in the latter.

Stubborn GRATITUDE for Our Salvation

Salvation Is A Past Reality (v. 1)

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

JUSTIFICATION: We have been declared righteous positionally. This verse begins a major transition in the book of Romans. Chapter 1-4 were all about justification and now he begins to explain the benefits of that specific doctrine. In chapters 1-3, Paul expounded the reality of our total depravity. We are all dead in our sin, unable to even seek after God. We all fall short of God's standard of perfection and therefore stand before his holiness guilty, condemned, and deserving of his infinite wrath. But even though we were wretched, even though we were enemies, he saved us. The record of decrees against us was nailed to the cross. Christ's perfect life and righteousness is credited to our account. The verdict is in. It cannot be rescinded or changed. We have been acquitted of all our guilt—freed from sin's penalty. We have been legally declared to be righteous! We now have **peace with God**. But we have more than that—

Now, as a result, we can experience **peace from God**. Even in the midst of continual upsets we have a calm and tranquil soul that is assured of its salvation. **Because we have been preserved from the most dreadful fate, we are content and fear nothing. Nothing this world can throw at us compares to the full brunt of God's wrath that we faced.** Peace is more than reconciliation. It is the Old Testament idea of *Shalom*: "And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places" (Isaiah 32:17-18). Paul writes elsewhere, "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful" (Col. 3:15).

Salvation Is A Present Reality (v. 2a)

"Through him we also have obtained access by faith into his grace in which we stand . . ."

SANCTIFICATION: We are being made more righteous progressively. Not only are we declared to be righteous, but throughout our life we continue to grow in the practice of righteousness. We are all fallen, frail, and flawed. None of us have made it. None of us will ever attain it in this life. "For this is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Thess. 4:3). And we should never be content with where we are in our Christian walk. Each day we should seek to "excel still more and more" (1 Thess. 4:1, 10). And we don't do this in our own strength. As a result of our righteous standing, by faith, we have access to God's grace in which we stand. "We have

boldness and confident access through faith in him” (Col. 3:12). We don’t rely on our own strength, but in his transforming grace and power. We have an ongoing access to his grace and we continue to stand in grace. We are firmly established in his grace—able to withstand the power of sin.

Salvation Is A Future Reality (v. 2b)

And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.”

GLORIFICATION: We will one day be made righteous permanently. “When we see him, we will be like him” (1 Jn. 3:2). We have this certain hope, this confident expectation, that our salvation will be complete when we stand before our God and are made new. We will be saved from the presence of sin. We will be saved from this cursed world and this corrupt body. No more sin and temptation. No more flaws and failures. No more suffering, tears, pain, death. We boast in this. We exult in this. We triumphantly rejoice because of this future hope. **We rejoice NOW before actual realization because it is so guaranteed.** Paul says later, “Those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified, he also glorified” (Rom. 8:30). It is as good as done. Nothing is more certain. It is our “living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, [our] inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for [us], who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation READY to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 1:3-5). This is real, substantial hope. This hope is **three-dimensional** as it includes our past, present, and our future. It is **holistic** as it frees us from the penalty, the power, and the presence of sin. It is **intimate** as it includes the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is the best news ever! Everything else falls short.

When we are most thankful for what is most secure, then—*and only then*—can we find thankfulness in the midst of uncertain circumstances. Our salvation makes sense of our suffering and places it in its appropriate context. “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). “For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort also” (2 Cor. 1:5).

Stubborn FORTITUDE in Our Suffering

Just as certain as our salvation is, we can also be certain that we will face suffering on this earth. Jesus guaranteed we would suffer. We need to safeguard against three false assumptions. **First**, we wrongly assume that *Christianity should be without tears*. But Jesus wept and suffered and promised we’d have trouble. So we don’t only expect suffering; we embrace suffering. **Second**, we wrongly assume that *our suffering is a result of God’s wrath*. But the last word from the cross was a triumphant cry: “It is finished.” So we can be certain there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. He has absorbed every last drop for us on the cross. **Third**, we wrongly assume that *our suffering is for no reason at all*. But our suffering is never arbitrary. God never allows suffering in our life without purpose. He **is too good, too loving,**

and too wise to allow his children to undergo meaningless suffering. Even though we don't have all the answers, isn't it so comforting to know that our suffering is never purposeless? In the grand scheme, he has purposely planned for our suffering to accelerate the sanctification process. It leads to greater maturity. Paul is not denying or downplaying the severity of suffering. He doesn't desire that we embrace suffering for suffering sake, but because of its benefits. Paul lists three—

Suffering Produces Endurance (v. 3)

“Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance . . .”

Suffering makes us steadfast, firmly established and growing stronger in his grace. Endurance can only be strengthened under pain and pressure. Only when we are stretched and pushed beyond what is comfortable will we grow. “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-4). We will be trained by our suffering. “For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it” (Rom. 8:24-25). Suffering trains us to endure well—to suffer long and well with fortitude, to not give up or give in when things get tough.

Suffering produces Character (v. 4a)

“. . . And endurance produces character . . .”

Persevering through pain and difficulty is a good character quality. No one wants a friend who will abandon them when things get hard. No one wants to hire someone who will give up at the first sight of difficulty. If we look back on our lives honestly, we must acknowledge that we have grown the most during times of trial. That is what trials are designed to do. Trials test our faith, but they refine it. Our impurities are removed and as a result it is strengthened and made more valuable. Impurities can only be removed under intense heat. “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor” (1 Pet. 1:6-7). Suffering proves and strengthens our character. It is specifically designed to make us more like Christ.

Suffering Produces Hope (vv. 4b-5)

“. . . And character produces hope . . .”

Our afflictions conspire to produce even greater hope. Suffering reinforces the hope we already have and makes us long for another world. We boast, exult, and triumph now in a hope that has not been realized because of faith. This stubborn hope clings to the promises of God and knows they will never let us down. “For I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). “For this light momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond any comparison” (2 Cor 4:17). No degree of temporal suffering in this life compares to the complete satisfaction we hope for in

the next. He promised eternal life, abundant life. This is God shouting to us in our pain. In His suffering he cried out, “It is finished.” In our suffering he cries out, “It is worth it.”

Augustus Toplady once wrote, “Afflictions are as nails, driven by the hand of grace, which crucify us to the world. God afflicts his people to make them better. Afflictions are then blessings to us when we can bless God for afflictions; whose single view is causing us to pass through the fire, is only to separate the sin he hates from the soul he loves.”⁴ Even in the midst of great disappointment and loss we can maintain a peace that passes understanding and joy inexpressible because God is working in us.

“ . . . and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. ”

Paul makes it abundantly clear: This hope will never disappoint us or put us to shame. It will never leave us embarrassed in front of our friends, family, or foes. It will never have to leave the White House. It will never walk off the field while another team celebrates. It will never be socks on Christmas morning. It will never plummet or crash. It will never stab us in the back. It will never be less than our expectations. **Jesus promised life and life abundantly. This hope will not only be realized, it will fully satisfy our every longing and bring fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore.** To verify this certain hope, Paul encourages us to look back to our conversion—when we first experienced God’s love—and emphasizes the ongoing reality of his love poured out in our hearts. The Holy Spirit who has been given to us is “the guarantee of our inheritance” (Eph. 1:14). If you can trust God with the eternity of your soul, you can trust him with today and tomorrow, the rest of this year, and the next. Placing your hope in Christ will never disappoint you. It will never betray you or bring you shame. It will most certainly be realized. It is guaranteed.

This year has been the great revealer. Ed Welch once wrote, “Suffering exposes the sin in our hearts in a way that few things can . . . When life is hard—especially when life remains hard—the allegiances of our hearts become more apparent.”⁵ Are you hoping in the right thing? Is the object of your hope reliable? Admiral Stockdale had **a triumphant optimism** that faced the brutal realities of his situation. The other men had **a naïve optimism** that leaned on false, unreliable hopes.

There were many false hopes this year offered to us in our suffering—false gospels, false views of justice, false offers of unity, false securities and comforts, false kingdoms, false saviors, false versions of the good life. **A naïve optimism that hopes in this world will eventually let us down and lead to our demise.** It’s okay to lose hope in these things because then you hope will be more fully fixed on Christ. When we are most satisfied in Him, we will not be tempted and allured by lesser things. True hope pushes out false hope. Where do we look for grace? In Christ

⁴ Augustus Toplady, “God’s Mindfulness of Man,” *The Complete Works of Augustus Toplady* (Sprinkle, 1987) 337.

⁵ Ed Welch, *Side by Side* (Crossway, 2015), 43.

alone. Where do we place our faith? In Christ alone. Where do we look for hope and strength and comfort and joy and peace? In Christ alone. Everything else will let us down.

We may cry out, “Why God? Why?” And we know from the story of Job that God is not required to answer these questions. **Suffering is not meant to be solved; it’s meant to be endured.** God desires us to see him in all his glory and to trust him implicitly without the answer to our questions. The thing molded does not have the right to question the molder, but we can be confident that we are still being molded with skill and care in the hands of our Maker. In the midst of your suffering and frustration and exhaustion, God declares, “I have a purpose for your pain!”

Understanding the brutal reality of sinfulness in a fallen world, being the recipients of the best news ever, knowing our example in Christ, and now seeing the benefits of suffering, we Christians are those who are best prepared to undergo suffering. That’s why Emily Dickinson could say, “I wade grief, whole pools of it,—I’m used to that.” That’s why William Carey could say, “I can plod and persevere. That is my only genius. I can persevere in any definite pursuit. To this I owe everything.”

May we have this same triumphant spirit, this stubborn gratitude and fortitude that transcends this world even in the midst of great suffering.

Instead of focusing on the things we’ve lost, maybe we should start to focus on what we’ve gained as a result of our suffering, even if it is something as simple as the *clarity* that Christ is enough. Spurgeon once said, “It is not the doctrine of justification that does my heart good, it is Christ, the justifier.”