

# WE BOAST IN OUR TRIBULATIONS

## Romans 5: 3-5 (Part 6)

And not only that, but we also boast in sufferings, knowing that our troubles produce endurance, and endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us (Romans 5: 3-5). [My translation].

The great apostle says we exult in our troubles because we know something about them that the world does not know, and cannot possibly know. **We exult in our tribulations, knowing that ...**

Knowing God's word --- something He has told us about our sufferings --- allows us to truly exult in them. Faith that is informed is able to fit its sufferings into a bigger picture. Faith knows something.

It's the very same faith our Lord Jesus himself had as he faced the horrors of his crucifixion. He knew what His Father had promised him. And so, **for the joy set before him, [he] endured the cross, despising the shame ... (Heb. 12: 3)**. Our Lord gloried in his tribulations **knowing that ...** the glory God had promised him before the world began was guaranteed upon the completion of his mission (**John 17:5**). <sup>1</sup>

Our Lord faced his ordeal **knowing that** there was a bigger picture. So what is this knowledge that faith feeds on?

Paul's reasoning is that we exult in our tribulations because we know **tribulations bring about perseverance**, (or as the King James Version reads, **tribulation worketh patience**). <sup>2</sup> We are to know that our tribulations are producing, manufacturing for us, a high-quality end result. Faith follows the argument and sees the purpose behind our sufferings.

And just what exactly are we to know is being manufactured? Three qualities are here outlined.

### 1. PERSEVERANCE

First, troubles produce **perseverance**, which in turn produces **proven character**, which thirdly, leads to a **hope that does not disappoint (Romans 5: 3-5)**.

The first thing pressures produce is **perseverance**, or as the King James Version (KJV) says, **patience**. The Greek word *hypomene* conveys more than endurance. It means the indomitable spirit that wins because it never gives up. *Hypomene* is that which actively conquers. William Barclay <sup>3</sup> illustrates the idea beautifully in the person who once said to a gallant soul who was undergoing a great sorrow: "Sorrow [certainly] colours life, doesn't it?" Back came the reply: "Yes! And I propose to choose the colour!" The Bible's idea of perseverance is the spirit which will not lie down.

### 2. PROVEN CHARACTER

The next thing we know pressures produce is **proven character**, or as the KJV renders it, **experience**. The idea is that if we endure the trials of trouble in the right attitude of *hypomene* then the genuineness of our Christian character is proved. The believer who passes the testing of his or her faith and who comes out

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<sup>1</sup> In John 17:5 the glory Jesus "had with the Father before the world was", is the glory promised to Messiah. It was glory in prospect after his sufferings and obedience to the cross were endured. Jesus himself said Messiah "must suffer these things and [then] to enter his glory" (Lk. 24: 26).

<sup>2</sup> *Katergazomai* means to manufacture, bring about, produce, or to fashion.

<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, *The Letter To The Romans: The Daily Study Bible*, Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, Sixth Impression, 1966, p72.

strong in Christ at the other end, demonstrates both to himself or herself, and to the world, the proof of their faith.

I shall never forget the impact Richard Wurmbrand's book *Tortured For Christ* had on my teenage life. Here was a Christian who endured indescribable tortures in communist Russia for his faithfulness to Jesus Christ. His tribulations included years of separation from his wife and family, years in solitary confinement in a small, dark, dank, silent prison cell, years of starvings, forced sleeplessness and yes, years of physical tortures such as being branded with hot pokers, beatings, etc.

But he came out of it with the sweetest character and the most glorious testimony. On a very rare occasion somebody in the audience asked Wurmbrand to display his physical scars. Wurmbrand took his shirt off, and to the horror of the audience's gasps, he showed the dreadful scars of years of burnings and beatings. "But aren't you bitter about your tormentors' inhumanity towards you and your family?" he was asked. "How can you have such a strong faith?" Wurmbrand replied, "When you crush a rose, it releases the perfume."

Yes, the same sun that hardens the clay softens the wax. We all have a choice when sufferings buffet us. We can choose what they will do us. We can choose to let them produce a bitter character or a better character. It all depends on whether we choose to believe our Father's assurances through His word, or not.

When affliction is met with perseverance, out of the battle emerges a purer, better, stronger more Christ-like character that knows the nearness of God. That is **experience, proven character**. We are to know our troubles produce for us proven Christian character. We come out more like our Lord Jesus Christ!

### 3. HOPE

The third thing pressures produce for us is a **hope that does not disappoint**. This is the same hope we saw in verse 2, that is, **hope of the glory of God**. We started with the certain hope of seeing the glory of God, and after enduring tribulations, we end with a hope that is stronger, brighter, more secure than ever --- a **hope that does not disappoint!**

When troubles at first assail us, they seem to be driving us away from any hope. Pressures and persecutions seem to mock our Christian hope. They seem designed to drive us away from God and His glory. But once endured and passed, we come out more sure, more certain, more convinced that we are headed for glory than we ever were.

There is a very good example of where Paul elsewhere states how our tribulations manufacture glorious hope. He says, **For our momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison (2 Cor. 4:17).**

There it is again. Afflictions (this is the same Greek word for 'tribulations') produce something. Our troubles help us discern what is temporal from what is eternal, what is **light** and fluffy with no lasting substance, and what is **weighty** and **gloriously beyond all comparison**. That is, **hope that does not disappoint**. We know there is a reward coming.

Seeing our sufferings through the lens of eternity focuses our minds on what is of lasting value. Read any inspiring biography of Christians who have gone through the mill of sufferings and tribulations for Christ, and the one outstanding common denominator shining through is how clearly they saw the big picture of **the eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison**.

### HOW IT ALL WORKS

Let's be very practical now. How do our trials and troubles work these eternally good qualities in the believer? Well, Paul actually works it out for us in his own example. He speaks of his severe troubles this way

For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction [i.e. tribulation] which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead (2 Cor. 1:8-9).

**First.** Notice that sufferings took Paul to a place of feeling utterly *hopeless*. His tribulations made him feel utterly weak and without any strength to cope. He felt **burdened excessively, beyond his strength**. In fact, his afflictions caused him to **despair even of life**.

If it were not for our trials and troubles few of us would ever come to the end of our own strength and resources. Many a self-sufficient person is humming happily along in life. They are firing on all cylinders, full steam ahead. God? Who needs God? We are doing very nicely on our own, thank you very much!

So, often our spiritual enemy is our own strength and our own self-sufficiency. Until some momentous event slaps us in the face and jolts us back into reality: We now know we really are mortal creatures. Made of dust. Vulnerable. Not in control. All the contrary forces of man and nature prove our own precarious place in it all.

### PAUL'S THORN IN THE FLESH IN 2 CORINTHIANS 12

The apostle Paul recognized the danger of self-sufficiency and pride in himself. He was **seized by force** (for that is the meaning of *arpazo* in 2 Cor. 12: 2) and lifted up into **the third heaven** where he saw and heard things beyond his ability to describe.

Ah, how tempting to go around bragging about the **surpassing greatness of revelations** (v. 7). In the context of 2 Corinthians it was especially tempting to parade these visions out in front of the Corinthian church --- which was starting to doubt the apostle's credentials --- and before the teachers who were bragging before the church because of their supposed superior experiences in the Lord. (If we had had such an experience, and seen such a vision, do we think we could keep it quiet and not get a little prideful at least?)

Paul obviously imagined he could control his pride after his exalted visions. But the Lord knew his heart better than Paul did. The Lord had to send him a **thorn in the flesh to buffet him** (v. 7). Endless have been the speculations as to what this thorn to keep Paul humble might have been. Sufficient here to say that Paul did not enjoy this thorn, or as it may be translated, this barb, prickle, or even stake! He earnestly prayed three times that the Lord would deliver him from this tribulation that was **buffeting** (or boxing and punching) him. We could even say this barb was stabbing him, jabbing him painfully, like a nasty splinter that you are very conscious of all the time until it is removed.

It doesn't really matter what this thorn or barb was. The point is, it was a trial, a tribulation, designed to stop Paul from **exalting himself** (v. 7). It was to keep him humble by reminding him of his real weakness without the grace of Christ, for the Lord answers him, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness"** ( v. 9).

### WINGS FASTENED WITH WAX

Do you remember the Greek legend of Daedalus and his son Icarus? I remember hearing it in primary school. And certainly everybody in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds knew the myth. It goes like this ...

Daedalus is a brilliant inventor—the Thomas Edison of his day. Unfortunately, he angers King Minos, the ruler of the island of Crete, and he has to hightail it out of there. Desperate to flee the island, Daedalus uses wax to build some wings for himself and his son Icarus. Daddy Daedalus warns his son to fly at a middle height: The seawater will dampen the wings and the sun will melt them. (Not good either way.)

Icarus heeds his father's advice for a bit, but then he gets cocky. He's having so much fun flying that he forgets the warning and flies too close to the sun. Sure enough, his wings melt, and Icarus plummets into the sea and drowns. Daedalus is (of course) devastated by his son's death, but the show must go on. He



flies on to Sicily, where he mourns Icarus and builds a temple in honor of the god Apollo. <sup>4</sup>

The danger for Paul was that his revelations would lift him up so high in pride, making him easily forget, that in this life our wings are always fastened on with wax!

Tribulations teach us the valuable lesson that the power and the life are in Christ, and not in ourselves!

## REMEMBER, YOU ARE BUT A MORTAL

In the days of the Roman Empire, when a conquering general or emperor paraded in triumph through the streets to the cheering crowds, apparently it was not uncommon for a slave to ride alongside the victor in his chariot.

It was the job of that slave to constantly whisper in the general's or emperor's ear, "Remember, you too are mortal!" Here are the adoring crowds exalting you, shouting your glories, and this slave is whispering above the din, "Remember, you too are mortal!" The danger of becoming too enamoured with one's own "hubris", as they called it --- arrogant pride --- was recognized. <sup>5</sup>

Paul was ultimately thankful that his thorn in the flesh kept whispering in his ear, "Remember, you are weak, and the strength belongs to Christ!"

Same for us. Our trials and troubles suddenly bring us very low, and to the end of themselves. We realise we need help beyond ourselves. And even for the unbeliever troubles and trials can turn a man or a woman from themselves, and they will begin to think about things like eternity, and God their Maker. And if he or she is sensible, they will pray and plead with God. They will begin to ask the big questions of life.

Of course, not many folks in the world will ultimately do this. (The lesson of the purpose of troubles for Christians is hard enough to get through!) But this is our Heavenly Father's loving design and wish. We are told that in the Last Days of the Great Tribulation, the judgments and the tribulations mankind will suffer, are not because God hates the world, but because He wants the world to wake up, come to its senses, and repent and be saved. <sup>6</sup>

But for the Christian, the good result is that after our time of trouble, we will know ourselves better than we thought we knew ourselves before. We know by experience like Paul, that our sufficiency is not in ourselves. We will know our wings in this life are fastened on with wax! And like Job, that man of many troubles, we come to the place of actually feeling, **Behold, I am insignificant ... I lay my hand on my mouth (Job 40: 4).**

**Second.** Notice the second effect his tribulations worked in Paul. Excessively weighed down and at the end of his own strength, and despairing of life itself, Paul says his tribulations taught him **not to trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.**

Have you ever been in a place where your trouble or situation has brought you to say to the LORD God, "Father, unless You come to my rescue, unless Your gracious Hand should hold me now, unless Your Life and Power intervene, I am a goner!" And somehow, perhaps even at the very last minute, help has come. Perhaps God sends a messenger, perhaps your circumstances suddenly and dramatically turn around.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.shmoop.com/daedalus-icarus/summary.html>

<sup>5</sup> Tom Wright tells this in *Paul For Everyone: 2 Corinthians*, SPCK, London, 2003, p132

<sup>6</sup> See Revelation 9:20-21; 16:9,11.

And all you can say is, "Thank you Lord God for this miracle! Thank you for raising me up by Your power. Thank you for hearing my prayers."

Your trouble has allowed God's resurrection power to raise you up. I well remember a certain pastor taunting me that because I would not confess that Jesus is God in the flesh, because I would not accept the mystery of the Trinity, that I had "dug a hole for myself". He was referring to the rejection I was experiencing from my church denomination, and from my previous colleagues in ministry.

Ah, but what a wonderful place to be ... in a pit, in a (metaphorical) tomb. There in that hole you know only God can raise the dead. Only God can bring new life and power to a dead man. And if anything is going to happen we know the excellency of the power is of God, and not of us. Our tribulation has taught us that we are but earthen pots, just clay vessels. But what a treasure we hold! (see 2 Cor. 4: 7f). It is nothing but the very presence and power of the Living God. And you know His grace and His strength in your weakness, and that you are in fellowship with the Gospel of the crucified Messiah, who is your pattern through it all.

Ah, there is nothing like this. After you have endured trouble, you are able to say, "I *know* God's Hand has rescued and lifted me up from the pit itself." You no longer need to rely on the encouragement of other believers, helpful as that is. You don't have to rely on the testimony of others, uplifting as that is, for you *know* God in your own life first-hand! Like Job you have the joy of being able to say, **I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees You! (Job 42: 5)**. You *know* God for yourself. Nothing and nobody can take this knowledge from you.

**Third.** With this new experiential knowledge of God's closeness and power, you know that whatever future trials or troubles or persecutions you may be called upon to face, that as God's child His love will never let you go. You know He has a purpose and a plan. He is getting you ready for eternity with Him!

You are able first-hand to agree with Paul's statement later in **Romans**,

**And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God ... (Rom. 8:28).**

Importantly, you will not be so tempted to again question God's love for you, or why He is permitting such heaviness to oppress you. With Job, you will now be able to say, **Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him (Job 13: 15)**.

When the Devil brings his doubts and accusations and says to you, "Where is your God now? Is this how a loving Father treats his children?", you will be able to answer, "Get behind me Satan, for God's word to me is that through it all, He has a plan. He is perfecting me. He is transforming me into the very likeness of His Son Jesus, who also learned obedience by the things which he suffered. God is bringing me to His glory. I know these troubles are God's method of getting me ready to live with Him forever."

If you are not His son or daughter, not His child, then God would not be bothered with disciplining you. **For if you are without discipline, of which all [God's own] have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons [of God] (Hebrews 12: 8)**. Far from making me question God's love for me, these tribulations are actually proving His love.

That is what our tribulations do, if we will let them have their perfect work in us. They prove us. And they prove God's faithfulness. And so the hope burns more powerfully within us. We are more certain of our salvation than ever before. The fiery furnace has burned the impure dross out, and the precious gold is left!

All the apostles who suffered hugely for their faithfulness to Christ, testified to blessings of their tribulations and persecutions. James wrote, **Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials , knowing that (!) the testing of your faith produces endurance ... (James 1:2-3)**. Exactly what Paul wrote!

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We exult in our tribulations, **knowing that** tribulation brings about perseverance, and perseverance proven character, and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us (Romans 5: 3-5).

Knowing what our Sovereign God tells us about His loving purposes in our tribulations, we can truly say, we **boast** and we **rejoice** in our troubles! We know that something eternally glorious is being manufactured, produced in us.