

AND NOT ONLY THAT ...

Romans 5: 3-6 (Part 5)

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].

We might well have jumped to a premature conclusion, if we had thought the apostle Paul had said everything he was going to say about the wonderful outcomes of the doctrine of “justification by faith”. But nothing could be further from the truth. As marvellous as the three great results of our being declared right with God through Jesus Christ are, Paul has more to say.

Really? What more can be said, than to learn that we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and that we do not fear the coming “Great White Throne” judgment the world will surely face?

What more can be said, than to know we have access to God’s Presence and stand in His favour, in equal honour with all the great prophets, apostles and servants of God?

What more can be added, than to know that our being declared right with God guarantees an entrance into the Kingdom of God’s glory, with new resurrection bodies to reign with Christ over a regenerated earth in universal goodness?

And yet, the apostle has not finished his subject. For he continues, **And not only that ...!** What can he possibly add? Ah. Our great apostle is not just a theologian with his head in the clouds. He has a pastor’s heart with a very practical approach. He knows that unless our new relationship with God makes a difference in the way we face life and the various challenges the world throws at us, then our faith is useless. The rubber must hit the road.

BECOME A CHRISTIAN AND ALL YOUR TROUBLES WILL BE OVER?

There are not a few Gospel preachers around these days who give the impression that if we will only trust in Christ, then all our troubles will end: Just “believe in Jesus” and all your problems will be fixed, we are assured. Become a Christian and you will have joy and peace and victory unceasing. Some go so far as to say that you will have full health and all your financial needs will be abundantly met, and you will prosper with material wealth.

I have known not a few folks who have swallowed this hook, line and sinker. They think that since they are now a Christian, their troubles will be over. But sooner or later, when troubles and sufferings inevitably bang them around, they call into question the genuineness of their faith.

So now Paul is going to pick up this great and necessary theme of Christian suffering ... **And not only so, but we boast in sufferings** What? Hasn’t he just told us that we **boast in hope of the glory of God?** And now, in the very next breath he seems to contradict himself by saying **we boast in our sufferings!** Rejoicing about the future glory we can understand, but boasting in our *sufferings*? Yep, our great apostle puts glory and sufferings together. Let’s explore!

CHRIST OUR MODEL

It almost goes without saying: For Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, the pattern of suffering before the glory has been laid down. Initially of course, Jesus’ disciples did not get this connection. They imagined --- in good orthodox Jewish belief at the time --- that Messiah would appear riding on his white,

all-conquering steed, smashing all enemies to set up God's kingdom on earth. Israel would be at the head of all nations through this new messianic order. How challenging to their faith in Jesus their Messiah to learn it would be otherwise!

Remember what the risen Lord Jesus said to the two downcast disciples on that road to Emmaus? Their faith was perplexed, even shattered, and they opined, "We were hoping that it was he who was going to redeem Israel". But the resurrected Christ gently corrected them, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things [first] and [then] to enter into his glory" (Luke 24: 21,25-26)?

With the benefit of hindsight, the apostle Peter came to understand this order of suffering before glory. He wrote that the prophetic Spirit through the Scriptures, predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow (I Peter 1: 11).

And again, Peter writing to Christians under severe persecution exhorts them, Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of his glory, you may rejoice with exultation (I Pet. 4:12-13). Repeat: God's program for His family, including His own beloved Son, is sufferings first, then glory.

Our Lord has indicated that his followers are going to be hated and persecuted and suffer troubles in all nations of this old world order, And you will be hated by all on account of my name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved (Matt. 10:22). Is it any wonder that the apostles strengthened the souls of the new believers, encouraging them to continue in the faith, by saying, 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God' (Acts 14: 22)?

And following his Lord and Master, the apostle Paul here in Romans 5 cannot speak of the coming glory of God without also dealing with the suffering that comes from being a Christian.

CHRIST LEARNED OBEDIENCE ON EARTH, NOT IN HEAVEN

Incidentally, this pattern of Christ's suffering before entering his glory is smashed if Jesus' perfection came already packaged up in the trinitarian notion that he is God from all eternity. For if Jesus' perfection is the automatic by-product of his alleged pre-existent Deity, then his sinlessness came already guaranteed. ¹

Contradicting this theory, we have the Bible declaration that, although he was a son, yet he learned obedience from the things which he suffered (Heb. 5: 8). Those who allege Jesus first obeyed His Father in heaven by agreeing to come to earth as man, do not understand this plain Scriptural declaration. A pre-existent Son utterly destroys this Biblical pattern of suffering before glory.

There is no suffering in Heaven. That's why the Son did not learn obedience to His Father in heaven! How preposterous to suggest that in Heaven a pre-incarnate God took orders from another who is God! No indeed. The Son had to learn obedience, and the sphere for this was on earth.

Furthermore, if Jesus' already possessed the eternal glory of being God, then the glory he received after his resurrection was simply a return to what he had already known from eternity. Indeed, the Scriptures state that the Son sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high; having become so much better than the angels (Heb. 1:3-4). This could never be said of one who was God from all eternity. ***What blasphemy to suggest that one who was always God has finally become so much better than the angels!***

A reinstated glory is *no reward*, for a reward is always something not enjoyed previous to the good deed --- How would you feel if you had done the right thing and handed in a very expensive piece of jewellery you

¹ For a more in-depth of this theme see my article, *Did Jesus Really Live By Faith?*

had found, and the owner said, "Why thank you for your honesty. I will give you \$100 from your own wallet as your reward"? ²

THE CHRISTIAN IS PROMISED TRIBULATIONS!

We may therefore lay it down as almost a law of faith, that the true Christian's experience must be patterned after Jesus' own example. Christians are more likely to have troubles and sufferings than anybody else! Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones suggests that the way to differentiate between the Christian faith and the various false religions is that ours is a life that never fails us, never lets us down when troubles bombard us. He states,

It is the cults that say, 'Believe this teaching and you will never have any more troubles. You will not know yourself ... You will walk with a fresh step and a bright outlook, and you will never have any troubles again.' this is always the language of the cults, but it is never the language of the New Testament. On the contrary, it says, 'In the world ye shall have tribulation.'³

Did not our Lord himself tell us about a certain kind of 'believer' **who hears the word, and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away (Matt. 13: 20-21).**

Jesus warned that trials and tribulations on account of faith in his Gospel-word will soon sort out the genuine from the false. Nothing will kill a purely psychological and emotional experience as quickly as persecution or ostracism. Thus, the way to test if our faith is the real deal is to see how we react in times of crisis and need. Does our faith stand the test or let us down when the blowtorch is applied?

Legion are those today who once professed faith in Christ, but tragedy has hit them, troubles have struck them, sufferings have plagued them, and they have wondered, 'Since I am a Christian now, why has God let all this trouble assail me?' And so they have abandoned their profession of faith. Many have become skeptics, if not atheists, because of their wrong-headed idea that sufferings somehow prove God does not love us. They started so well and full of joy and hope. But now they are disappointed, and have fallen away.

But of course, a faith that does not help us when we need it most in the hour of darkness and crushing sadness or loneliness is not the kind of faith the Bible holds up as true faith. The great examples of the godly have been those that have gone through the furnace of affliction and whose faith has not only stood the test, but shone through triumphantly. More of this soon.

So we must lay it down as an axiom. Genuine Christian faith is an informed faith, knowing that it is going to suffer trouble precisely because one is a follower of Jesus --- we suffer tribulations **because of [his] word (Matt. 13: 21)**. This world hated and rejected and killed our Lord Jesus, and it will treat his servants the same way.

By definition then, a Christian is one who is united with Christ and identified with him in his rejection and sorrows in this world. For our Lord it was suffering before the glory, humiliation before the glory, the cross before the crown, shameful death before glorious immortality. And the servant is not above his Lord!

BUT EVERYBODY SUFFERS.

² Note in Philippians 2: 5-11 that it was Messiah's obedience in a life of sufferings and death on the cross, that demonstrated his humility. His humility --- rather than his alleged pre-existence --- proved he did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped. In v. 6 the Greek present participle [*uparXon*] is wrongly translated in many English translations as "existed", but it is not referring to a past condition, such as a pre-incarnate state. It is correctly to be read as "existing". Christ's existing in the form of God, or in the image of God, was all here on earth! For this precise reason he has his reward in glory now (Phil. 2:6-10).

³ Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: Exposition of Chapter 5, Assurance*, Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1971. p61

But Greg, someone may object, everybody ever born into this world experiences suffering. There's nothing special about Christian suffering. People of no faith, other faiths, any faith, know troubles. What makes you Christians think you are extra special in the matter of tribulations?

True enough. There are many persecuted minorities in the world. Furthermore, just to be human is to be born into trouble. It's a consequence of our fallen humanity, our estrangement from our Creator since Adam rebelled. **Man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward (Job 5:7).**

The essential meaning of the word tribulation [*thlipsis*] is pressure. Tribulation means afflictions, stresses, troubles, any kind of pressure that squeezes us in any form whatsoever. Perhaps it arises from inner feelings of guilt or inadequacy, perhaps from mental depression or bodily weakness and sickness, perhaps it's financial woes or family breakdown, perhaps it's from persecutions or just the aches and pains of old age. But whatever form it takes, internal or external, tribulations are a part of human existence.

So what is it that transforms tribulations for the believer in Christ into triumphs for rejoicing? I think part of the answer is the way the Christian responds to his or her sufferings as opposed to the way the man of the world tries to deal with his troubles. *Christian* suffering is not different in quality or quantity necessarily, but it is different in the method it adopts in dealing with it.

GRUMBLING AND COMPLAINING

It probably goes without saying, that the worst approach to our adversities is to grumble and complain about them. You know that expression; What's the point of complaining because nobody listens? We all know how hard it is to put up with somebody who is always complaining! They end up not being very attractive or likeable folks.

But worse, God Himself can't stand the mumblers and the grumblers. A whole generation of complainers perished in the wilderness, so great was God's distaste for this attitude. Grumbling is the opposite of joyful and confident trust in God, and has no part in the Christian response to sufferings.

Holy Spirit filled believers consider it a privilege to suffer for their Lord on account of His word. After being threatened by the authorities and severely beaten, the apostles Peter and John **went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for [Christ's] name (Acts 5:41).**

STOICISM

The fundamental tenet of stoicism was that the wise man will be indifferent to pain and pleasure, to wealth and to poverty, to success and to misfortune because he has fortified his inner self with the impenetrable armour of apathy. He taught himself not to care about anything. Thus, a man's freedom is to live independently of his circumstances by living in harmony with whatever the Universe decides to throw at him.

Stoicism spread from Athens from around 302 BC and became the dominant philosophy of the Hellenistic world. Eventually, the whole Roman Empire became indoctrinated by the doctrine that taught austerity and fearless devotion to duty. Scorn your sufferings was the mantra. Resign yourself to your lot in life.

Needless to say, there are some aspects of Stoicism that Christianity incorporated into its method of dealing with tribulations. The apostle Paul himself admitted he had **learned to be content [autarkes literally means to be self-sufficient] in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need (Phil. 4:11 -12).**

But that was only part of Paul's answer. Don't forget he adds the all important key that, **I am strong for all things in the one empowering me, i.e. Christ (literal translation of Phil. 4:13).** Paul did not stop at his own inner resources like the Stoics. And he certainly did not stop at passive resignation.

POSITIVE THINKING

Mountains of books, reams of paper, hours of commentary, have been expended in expounding the virtues of the power of positive thinking. And, we have to be honest again, and admit that there is a lot to be said for this.

Change your thoughts, and you will change your world. When the Bible talks about our universal need to repent and believe the Gospel, it's talking about the necessity of changing our minds, our worldview. So, lose the battle for the mind, and we lose the control centre for happy and successful living. Lose the control tower of your mind, and your thoughts like airplanes will fly off course, and either collide in mid air, or lose altitude and eventually crash and burn on the ground in despair.

And what is the Bible if it is not God's revelation addressed to our rationality? Indeed, a strong case can be made that the reason we get ourselves so overcome by our problems, is because we do not fill our minds with the positive faith-building blocks of Scripture.

How blessed is the man whose delight is in the Law of the LORD. He meditates day and night in God's word and so grows like a firmly planted tree beside the streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. And in whatever he does, he prospers (Ps. 1).

HUMOUR

I wrote in Part 2 of this series ⁴, that the atheistic evolutionist believes the antidote to mankind's interminable ills is found in the momentary relief of laughter,

There is an implicit acknowledgement in humour that, finally, we're all stuffed, whereas religion tries to persuade us that life isn't meaningless, and against all the evidence, that we're cherished and protected by a deity who will allow us to survive death to rise from our graves like so many missiles from their silos. To allow people the pleasure of laughter would be to offer them another method of dealing with the darkness. ⁵

But does this 'laughing head in the sand' approach really answer the despair of our troubles? Will "the pleasure of laughter" really dispel the mystery of inexplicable sufferings? This approach is akin to that famous *Bulletin* cartoon showing a couple of builders' labourers dangling over an abyss. One clings to the girder, the other to his mate's trousers which are slowly slipping from his hips. "Stop laughing," says one to the other, "this is serious." ⁶

I don't know about you, but I definitely cry out for more than humour in the face of my troubles. And I find it instructive, that there is very little in the Bible telling us to laugh at, or to laugh through, our pain. Yes, **there is a time to laugh (Ecc. 3:4)**, and laughter may be good medicine for the soul, but it only brings temporary relief (**Prov. 17:22**). Thank God for a good clean joke! Some have the gift of humour. And I think it's God-given. But for all that, **Even in laughter, the heart is sorrowful (Prov. 14:13)**.

THE CHRISTIAN METHOD

So, when tribulations squeeze us, what is our approach to be? Surprisingly, as already noted, Paul employs the same word he has just used when he wrote that we **boast** in hope of the glory of God. He now says we have the same attitude where our troubles are concerned. We **exult in our tribulations**, i.e. we **boast** in them.

Right at this point some have accused the apostle of being a masochist. Perhaps Paul is a personality type who is only happy when he is miserable? Perhaps he is like some who are quite suspicious if the sky is blue, the sun is shining, and the birds are singing, but all the while they are thinking, "Oh, oh, there must be

⁴ The article is titled, *We Have Peace With God*.

⁵ Phillip Adams & Patrice Newell, *The Penguin Book of Australian Jokes*, Penguin, Ringwood, Australia, 1994. p. 11

⁶ Ibid, p. 25

a storm brewing. Life was not meant to be this easy! Everything's too good by half." Yes, it is true, some are miserable if they are not miserable.

But Paul is definitely not saying we are to be happy in misery. Far from it. He himself did not enjoy deprivations, persecutions, beatings, trials. Sometimes these things overwhelmed him to the point where he despaired even of life itself (2 Cor. 1:8). Like Jesus the Man of Sorrows, Paul felt his tribulations keenly.

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 is this key to transforming our troubles that we will explore in the next installment, PART 6, [We Boast in our Tribulations](#))